

New FCC 103.1 license could jam WRNR's northern signal

Annapolis radio station WRNR FM had a rude awakening last week.

The Federal Communications Commission, which controls licenses for all broadcast stations, issued a license to a low-power FM station in Baltimore with the same bandwidth, 103.1 FM.

Though low power — 100 watts compared to WRNR's 6,000 watts — its signal could interfere with the Annapolis station's signal in northern Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Howard and Harford counties.

That isn't good for business or the station's loyal listeners, station officials said.

"It could affect 30 percent of our listenership," said Steve Kingston, the station's owner. "And the thing is we found out about it from a listener."

The FCC did not notify the station, which plans to request reconsideration with the FCC.

By the time the station was aware of the situation, the license had been issued.

Kingston and Program Director Bob Waugh got busy.

Late last week, Waugh and station staff put together public service announcements. They also put up a message online inviting listeners and advertisers to fill out a form that would become part of the station's FCC appeal.

"The reaction was overwhelming," Waugh said.

The reaction was so swift the station took down the announcements and the petition link online early this week.

"We didn't want to be alarmists, to a degree," Waugh said. "People hear an announcement and reacted with 'Oh, my WRNR is going away,' but that is not the case. But a significant part of our broadcast signal could be compromised."

The FCC issued the new 103.1 license under a program called the AM Revitalization Act, which attempts to prop up AM stations across the country through various rule changes and other means.

The program includes allowing AM stations to use weak FM signals as so-called repeaters, which cannot broadcast original material but only repeat what is aired on the AM station.

The license issued last week would rebroadcast the signal of WRBS-AM, a religious talk radio station in Baltimore. That station is owned by an FM station with the same call letters, WRBS-FM, at 50,000 watts — the most powerful FM station Maryland.

No representatives from WRBS could be reached for comment Thursday afternoon.

"We are fighting two big markets (Washington and Baltimore) and after all that entails, to have this thrown at you?

We have no way to overcome it, no way to improve our signal. This could cripple our competitive reach," Kingston said.

He said the station has advertisers based in Baltimore who want to reach the listeners in Anne Arundel, Baltimore and Harford counties.

"Some of them wrote passionate letters of support, not only as advertisers but listeners. We are more affordable and this could affect their advertising decision-making to advertise with us."

WRNR urges supporters to send an email to Iwantmyrn timer@wnr.com.

Those wishing to weigh in on the FCC matter more directly can contact the FCC examiner at Robert.Gates@fcc.gov.